

Supporting Comprehension Performance and Students' Motivation toward Reading Skills through Cooperative Learning Pedagogy**Vahid Norouzi Larsari**

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Email: vahid.larsari@gmail.com Tel: +420 736190117**ABSTRACT**

This study is an investigation into the effects the use of cooperative learning method in English as a second language reading comprehension performance and how it improves the students and their motivation toward reading. 60 Iranian EFL learners participated in this study and were divided into two groups (experimental group vs. control group). A pretest-posttest control group design was utilized. Data were analyzed using a one-way analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) to test the differences between the experimental and the comparison group. The results of this analysis showed there was no significant difference between experimental and comparison groups in the level of students' motivation toward reading. There were significant differences between the two groups in the reading comprehension performance, which favored the experimental group. Finally, the researcher discussed educational implications for each variable and suggested several recommendations for implementation and further research.

Keywords: Cooperative learning; Traditional Methods; Reading Comprehension; Achievement Motivation**INTRODUCTION**

Cooperative Learning (CL) is a famous strategy among educational researchers and practitioners that promotes the cognitive and linguistic improvement of learners of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) (Kagan, 1995; Kessler, 1992; McGroarty, 1989). It takes place when students work together in small groups instead of competing for acknowledgment or grades in large classrooms. This idea of CL coincides with John Dewey's ideas of group activities. Dewey (1916) maintained that participating in a shared incident prepares students for democratic living. The participants engage in some form of instruction or educational activity to acquire the knowledge, information, and skills necessary to succeed in the workforce, learn basic skills, earn qualifications, or otherwise enrich their lives. Moreover, active class participation changed the environment of the classroom setting in several different ways. Students who participate effectively will encourage each other to ask questions, explain and justify their opinions, articulate their reasoning, and elaborate and reflect upon their knowledge.

CL encourages active participation in authentic discussion and mutual problem-solving activities in an environment of personal and academic support. It also helps learners to be independent and have self-confidence when they organize their learning (Clifford, 1999; Thomson, 1998). Moreover, CL may be especially useful for English as a second language/English as a foreign language learners because it offers a variety of flexible ways for classifying instruction and integrating language and content learning into various discourse and instructional contexts (Olsen, 1989). According to Johnson and Johnson (1987), students "imitate each other's behavior and identify with friends possessing admired competencies. Through providing models, reinforcement, and direct learning, peers shape a wide variety of social behaviors, attitudes, and perspectives" (p.63).

Many researchers have established the theoretical importance of CL in Foreign language (FL) teaching in which CL gives highest prospects for meaningful input and output in a very interactive and helpful environment. This is because CL increases the motivation and psychosocial improvement of FL learners (Cohen, 1994). They believe that CL is not only a methodology used with English as a foreign language but a general term of several methods in organizing and conducting teaching and learning. It can be used at any grade level, any subject area and with

any task (Johnson & Johnson, 1984). Language discourses are always noted as the first obstruction to the progress of any foreign language. According to a number of studies (Basamh, 2002), the nature of classroom instruction depends on lecturing and memorization. Most of the Iranian teachers adopted the traditional educational instruction methods where a teacher delivers a lecture and the students receive it. Students usually do not participate in searching for information; rather they get information in an inactive way because they rarely express themselves. Students' participation is limited by teacher and textbook questions, which usually are at lower levels of Bloom's taxonomy (Ministry of Education, 2004). Much research has been done on CL and how it improves EFL learning. The majority of those reports, studies and surveys show that CL techniques are more effective than traditional ones for student achievement. Those studies assume that when CL is used in schools, it will increase the amount of interaction among students in English and other classes. Students spend too much time listening to the teacher or working individually to do their assignment in the class. But interacting with peers helps them to increase their learning skills as they learn from each other and become less dependent on the teacher. Moreover, CL results in students' feeling greater mutual anxiety for each other and an overall greater liking of school, as compared to students who receive traditional teaching techniques. Those studies show significant difference of students' achievement who learn through CL which is found across ability levels, grade levels and subject matter, including foreign language learning. The findings of those studies show that CL does not just supplement traditional teaching methods, but takes the place of them.

2. Methodology

2.1. Participants

Participants in this study were selected from the population of the secondary stage of Iran public schools who study English as a foreign language. They were all female and their ages ranged between 16 to 18 years. Actually, this study employed a sampling method that was in part a convenience sample. Ultimately, subjects were chosen by the teacher and principal. First, over 60 students were chosen and were asked if they would participate in the study. Of those who agreed to participate, 60 students were assigned numbers 1-60. Students with odd numbers were placed in one group, and students with even numbers were placed in the other group. Those Sixty students ($n = 60$) were selected from the three levels of the secondary stage from The Third Secondary School in Tehran City. The study used two methods of language teaching strategies in which thirty students ($n = 30$) studied together in six teams of five members each according to the dynamics of the Learning Together CL model. The other thirty ($n = 30$) studied the same material according to procedures in the traditional classroom (whole-class instruction). There was one English teacher from the same school who cooperated in teaching those two groups.

2.2. Instruments

The effectiveness of using CL in EFL reading classes was determined by comparing the learning process of the two groups. For reading achievement, all participants were given a pretest before the treatment. This test was based on a reading selection and included 12 items that measured participants' literal comprehension of ideas directly stated in the passage and included multiple-choice, short answers, sentence-completion, etc. At the end of the treatment, all participants were given a posttest that measured the learning outcomes and competencies targeted during the treatment. This test was based on a reading selection that was not previously read by the participants. It included 12 multiple-choice questions, short answers, sentence completion, etc. For students' attitudes toward CL (SATCL), there was a questionnaire before and after the treatment comprised of 12 Likert-scale items. This questionnaire was developed recently by Alhaidari (2006). In his study, the coefficient Alpha reliability of the pretest was .78, and the posttest was .80. For this study measures of internal consistency would be computed using Alpha after the data has been collected and analyzed. For students' motivation toward reading (SMTR), there was a questionnaire administered before and after the treatment which was developed by Baker and Wigfield (1999). The original questionnaire contained 54 items. The coefficient Alpha reliability of this questionnaire was .83 for the pretest, and .84 for the posttest. The researcher selected from this questionnaire 13 items that dealt with the reading skill. Each item was rated on a scale from very different from me (1) to a lot like me (4).

2.3. Procedure

The researcher gave all of the instructions to the English teacher who participated in the study and answered all her questions and that was two weeks before the treatment during the last two weeks of October, 2010.

At the beginning of the second semester of the school year, 60 English language students from The Third Secondary School were selected non-randomly, that was in part a convenience sample, from a population of approximately 500. Selected students were divided into two groups, the control group and the experimental group. The same teacher taught both classes. The study occurred from early October to the end of November 2010. During those eight school weeks, each group was gathered once a week and the session period was 45 minutes long. Six passages were covered at that time. Both groups covered the same subject matter and used the same text. Both groups received the same reading instruction for the same amount of time. Before the beginning of the treatment, both groups were given the pretest and pre questionnaires. The researcher conducted the pretest measures before the cooperative learning began.

During the eight school weeks, the control group of students was taught as usual. Students received the information as listeners without the employment of CL in this class. Therefore, they were taught using traditional methods of lecturing, open discussions (whole-class discussion) and each student worked individually. The students in the experimental group were taught by involving them in CL methods.

The cycle of each of these classes were as follows: a general discussion about the topic of the new passage; individual reading silently; teacher reading aloud to the class; then students reading aloud; and students participating in cooperative learning activities in which they identified new words, summarized a passage, wrote a suggestion about the passage, and answered textbook exercises. At the end of the eight weeks, the posttest and the questionnaire were administered to both groups to compare their achievements.

3. Results

The Analysis of Covariance test (ANCOVA) was the statistical method used in this study. The treatment condition (experimental versus control) was used as the independent variable, while the posttest scores of reading comprehension performance and students' motivation toward reading were used as dependent variables. In this analysis, the pretest scores of the participants served as a covariate in order to control for any potential preexisting difference in the performance of the two groups. In the following section, the researcher presents the results of the analysis of the two dependent variables: reading comprehension and students' motivation toward reading. The first question in this study was: Is there a significant difference in EFL reading comprehension (RC) performance of secondary stage in Saudi public girls' schools when comparing students taught using cooperative learning and those taught using traditional methods? Table 1 contains the mean scores and standard deviations of the pretest and posttest of the RC test for the control and experimental groups. The results showed that on the pretest the experimental group ($X= 6.40$, $SD= 3.24$) scored higher than the control group ($X= 4.43$, $SD= 1.95$). Moreover, on the posttest the control group ($X= 7.50$, $SD= 2.96$) scored lower than the experimental group ($X= 11.96$, $SD= 2.72$).

Table 1. Pretest-Posttest Mean Scores and Standard Deviations of the Experimental and Control Groups on the Reading Comprehension Test (RC)

Group	N	PRETEST		POSTTEST	
		X	SD	X	SD
Control Group	30	4.43	1.95	7.50	2.96
Experimental Group	30	6.40	3.24	11.96	2.72

When the results were tested using analysis of covariance ANCOVA (Table 2), the post measure showed that there were significant differences between the two treatment groups in reading comprehension performance, adjusted for pretest scores, favoring the experimental group $F(1, 57) = 28.728$, $P = .000$ at the $\alpha=.05$ level. The mean score for the control group was 7.50 and the SD was 2.96, while the mean score for the experimental group was 11.96 and the SD was 2.72. However, the mean differences between the control and experimental groups were 4.212 which is statistically significant $.00<.05$. The data analysis showed that the correlation between the pre

and posttests was ($r = .307$), and this was expected because of two reasons: (1) the pre and the posttest were not the same tests; and (2) there was intervention.

Table 2. Analysis of Covariance (ANCOVA): Comparison between the Control and the Experimental Groups based on Reading Comprehension (RC)

Group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Mean Differences	Sig.
Control Group	30	7.50	2.96		
Experimental Group	30	11.96	2.72	4.212*	.000

*Sig<.05

The Second question in this study was: Is there a significant difference in the level of students' motivation toward reading (SMTR) when comparing students taught using cooperative learning and those taught using traditional methods? The data analysis of this variable indicated that there was no significant difference between the experimental and the control groups on the pretest measure. The mean and standard deviation of the control group was $X = 2.84$, $SD = .45$ and of the experimental group was $X = 2.61$, $SD = .34$. On the posttest measure, the results showed that there was no significant difference between the experimental and control groups. The mean and standard deviation of the control group was $X = 2.82$, $SD = .36$ and of the experimental group was $X = 2.66$, $SD = .40$. However, when comparing the mean scores of the two groups, there were very small initial differences between them on both measures.(See table 3)

Table 3. Pretest-Posttest Mean Scores and Standard Deviations of the Experimental and the Control Groups for the Variable: Students' Motivation toward Reading (SMTR)

Group	N	PRETEST		POSTTEST	
		X	SD	X	SD
Control Group	30	2.84	.45	2.82	.36
Experimental Group	30	2.61	.34	2.66	.40

When the results were tested using analysis of covariance ANCOVA (Table 4), the post measure showed that there were no significant differences between the two treatment groups in the students' motivation toward reading, adjusted for pretest scores, $F(1, 57) = 2.373$, $P = .129$ at the $\alpha=.05$ level. The mean score of the control group was 2.82 and the standard deviation was .36, while the mean score of the experimental group was 2.66 and the SD was .40. On the other hand, the mean differences between the two groups were .161 which is not statistically significant $.129 < .05$.

Table 4. Analysis of Covariance (ANCOVA): Comparison between the Control and the Experimental Groups based on Students' Motivation toward Reading (SMTR)

Group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Mean Differences	Sig.
Control Group	30	2.82	.36		
Experimental Group	30	2.66	.40	.161*	.129

*Sig<.05

4. Discussion

This study was conducted at Third Secondary School in Tehran City for eight school weeks from early October to the end of November 2010. It employed two groups of subjects: an experimental group and a control group. Each group had 30 participants who met once a week. The control group was taught using traditional methods, which centered on the teacher and resulted in a lack of participation between the students themselves. The experimental group was taught using the cooperative learning method that depends on small heterogeneous groups of students who worked together to maximize their own and each other's learning. A pretest and a posttest were given to both groups as well as pre questionnaires and post questionnaires. During the four weeks it was seen that it is not easy to switch between the two methods but using the cooperative learning method is so simple for both the teacher and the student. As you know the traditional way is based on the teacher only, but in CL way both the teacher and the students are working together as a team. Through group participation, the experimental group does their best to finish the work quickly, help each other's in order to get the correct answer, expand their knowledge, have positive feelings about cooperation, and respect the time. The weaker students improve, as they learn from their group better. The students were evaluated through Teacher's Form for Group Evaluation. For the second group, the control group, she said, In this group, students depend on themselves as they work individually, and they try to look for more information as they can. The teacher can assess the students easily.

Nevertheless, using this traditional way requires more time to finish the work. Weaker students become frustrated when they fail to get the correct answer compared to the excellent ones. Some students intentionally leave some questions without answer. The teacher needs to wait until they finish the work because there is no participation or enthusiasm between them in which they can get the right answers quickly.

The results of the analysis of data for this study indicated that there was no significant difference between the two groups on motivation toward reading (SMTR) $F(1, 57) = 2.373$, $P = .129$, but there were significant differences on another dependent variable, reading comprehension (RC) $F(1, 57) = 28.728$, $P = .000$. Although the study did not yield statistically significant differences between the control and the experimental groups on the dependent variable of students' motivation toward reading, it did show that using CL on EFL reading comprehension is more effective than comparable regular textbook instruction in improving the EFL reading achievement of Iranian high school students. However, the results did not favor the cooperative learning method on motivation toward reading. We might conclude that motivation is a multifarious aspect that cannot be changed in just eight interventions. Students' motivation possibly requires more effort and time to be enhanced.

Furthermore, the findings of the current study agreed with the findings of previous studies concerning the positive effects of CL in improving reading achievement in English as a first language (Stevens, & et al, 1987; Greenwood, Delquadri, & Hall, 1989; Johnson & Johnson, 1999). The outcomes of this study support the findings that CL can increase reading achievement in L2 through cooperation between small groups in a supportive and stress-reduced atmosphere.

5. Conclusion

This study lends support to cooperative learning as an effective methodology when it is implemented in EFL classroom. It gives evidence that CL can improve students' reading comprehension performance. This is clearly demonstrated in the results of this study by the remarkable change of the participants' test scores after CL intervention in the reading course. The results of this study matched results of other studies in which EFL learners in public schools that use CL as a part of their instructional technique did learn significantly better than those who did not use CL in their learning process (Johnson et al., 1981; Ghaith, 2002; Swain, 1985). Furthermore, much research confirmed the successful use of CL techniques in motivating students toward reading which guides them to the goal of personal improvement and understanding. It should be noted that in this study, students' motivation toward reading (SMTR) produced no significant differences. The lack of difference in SMTR in this study might be explained due to the short duration of the treatment. Finally, it might be said that today's EFL students have little motivation for the lecture method and for the lack of dialogue inside the classroom. As a result, teachers

should pull learners into the excitement of learning, through strategies that can build a successful learning environment.

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